

Chicken Big

By BUZZ BURZA

How a Peace Corps volunteer helped a 200-chicken farm develop into a multimillion dollar business.

About four hours northeast of Mumbai, Maharashtra, is the city of Nasik, also the home of the D'Souza family and the setting for their story with a happy ending...a very, very happy ending for Marshall D'Souza, a local ice house worker. It turned out that way because the D'Souzias met some Peace Corps volunteers and their world changed.

Three years before the arrival of the Peace Corps volunteers, Americans who work for subsistence pay in developing countries, prudent Christine D'Souza, Marshall's wife, received permission from the owner to keep a few chickens behind the ice factory where Marshall worked. She wanted to help pay their children's school fees, and her sons, Richard and Elias, fittingly, were to help out with the chores. Marshall was fully employed at the ice house but, true to his agrarian roots, had acquired three hectares of land on the outskirts of Nasik. They moved the chickens to the family's farmland and added a piggery, rows of vegetables and some field crops. It was a small farm, adaptable in the hands of two young D'Souzias who would take a modest and resourceful family to the upper strata of international business.

At the suggestion of their parish priest in 1964, the D'Souzias ordered 200 day-old chicks of the respected Arbor Acres brand. The chicks arrived in July, but this newest wrinkle in proper, innovative farming wasn't smooth sailing; a month later, half of the brood had died.

At church one Sunday, young Elias heard about the "new experts in town" and set off to find the house of the Peace

Corps volunteers. When he found the house, he discovered their door was locked. Everyone was at the Collector's Independence Day function.

When Ivan Brotzman, one of the volunteers, returned home from the collector's event, he found Elias waiting on his stoop. Elias was amazed that he looked as old as Elias' father because most Peace Corps workers were young, just out of college. Ivan only had to listen to a few words before setting off to find out why the D'Souzias' chicks were dying. He didn't even take the time to unlock his front door.

That was one of the first lessons Elias learned from Ivan; a no-nonsense approach to responsibility and getting the job done right. The rest of what he and his family would learn over the years from the Brotzmans is canonized under what today Elias calls "the dignity of labor."

Ivan's solution was simple: construct the famous Peace Corps coop using a deep litter system and the D'Souzias'

problem was solved. Marshall quit the ice business in 1965 and joined the family in the poultry enterprise, which is today a multi-million dollar family-run business named after Christine and Marshall: C&M.

The D'Souzias built a business raising chickens: They now sell their day-old chicks, hatching eggs or parent stock in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and Kenya.

The company has also developed a pure-line breeding program that they say is one of the best in the world, and their virology laboratory is among the finest in South Asia. They employ more than 50 veterinarians who perform diagnostic procedures to ensure the purity of their products. They believe they're well-prepared to avoid the specter of bird flu and are even confident their company can play a role in the Middle East, Japan and Europe where others may be less fortunate. C&M could offer an alternative source of competitively priced supply.

The considerable depth and strength of India's production of both eggs and broilers is directly attributable to what the thousands of Peace Corps volunteers accomplished during their 15-year presence in India. The success in India is a result of a vast number of individuals working independently. What happened in Nasik is even more impressive.

When I first arrived in Gwalior, as part of a rural community action program dealing with poultry in 1965, the Peace Corps was in its fourth year and poultry was firmly established as the field of choice. It

Ivan and Edith Brotzman at Nasik.



From the D'Souza family's personal collection



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Courtesy C&M Farms

Far left: Broiler stock at C&M Farms.

Center: Ivan Brotzman (left) and an unidentified Peace Corps volunteer building a bamboo chicken coop.



From the D'Souza family's personal collection

Above left: The D'Souzas' modern chicken breeding facility at Nasik.

Left: One of the first chicken coops built by the D'Souza family in Nasik, with advice from the Brotzmans.

was the ideal entry-level position for the average young person with a general Bachelor of Arts degree in America.

The last person to send to India to assist in raising chickens was what in the West would be considered an “expert,” someone with a degree in poultry science. Such an expert would be looking for 100,000-bird flocks. But the average Peace Corps volunteer in India in the 1960s would find only 100-bird flocks, at best. Yet Ivan and Edith Brotzman were not average Peace Corps volunteers of the 1960s. Ivan was a World War II veteran. They were both over 50 and had just sold their Wisconsin dairy farm because their two sons had chosen other work. For the Brotzmans, the Peace Corps was the beginning of a second career, rather than prelude to a first.

The city of Nasik now surrounds the D'Souza property and farming in this neighborhood is no longer possible. A gatekeeper called the house and I introduced myself to Elias' wife, Terry. I paid the driver and walked up the long circular driveway where several old, nondescript cars were parked. The house was not new, and a design style I can only call

restrained, modern, large.

Terry and her daughter, Michelle, graciously served me tea in a baronial reception room where two rows of eight elegant carved chairs faced each other beneath a six-meter ceiling.

There were, however, no servants or chauffeurs. Michelle drove me to meet her father, and we ate a lunch the brothers brought from home, and Elias drove me to the railway station the next evening. The D'Souzas enjoy work. Such an approach highlights the dignity of labor, a key factor to their success.

Their corporate offices occupy a pair of art deco two-story bungalows that mirror each other. Plans are for this homely touch to be replaced with a seven-story corporate office that will tower over the booming real estate market of Nasik.

Elias sat behind an uncluttered desk in an uncluttered office where the only decoration was a large photograph of what I immediately recognized as a Peace Corps-designed chicken coop. The thatched roof and wire mesh window sealed with a door was a basic design concept that was replicated thousands of times in India. This photograph graces the

office walls of both brothers and appears in their corporate promotional materials.

Elias gave me a brief introduction to the operations. The corporate structure is lean and family-based: Elias is the chairman, Richard the managing director, their sister Helen's husband, Rudolph, looks after administrative affairs and Elias' 30-year-old son, Melvin, handles the marketing. Melvin earned a poultry science degree from the University of Georgia in the southern United States and is the expert most Peace Corps volunteers were not. Richard, who has been in a wheelchair for more than 35 years, joined us for the discussion and lunch. What unfolded was a story of tragedy, hard work, major setbacks and success.

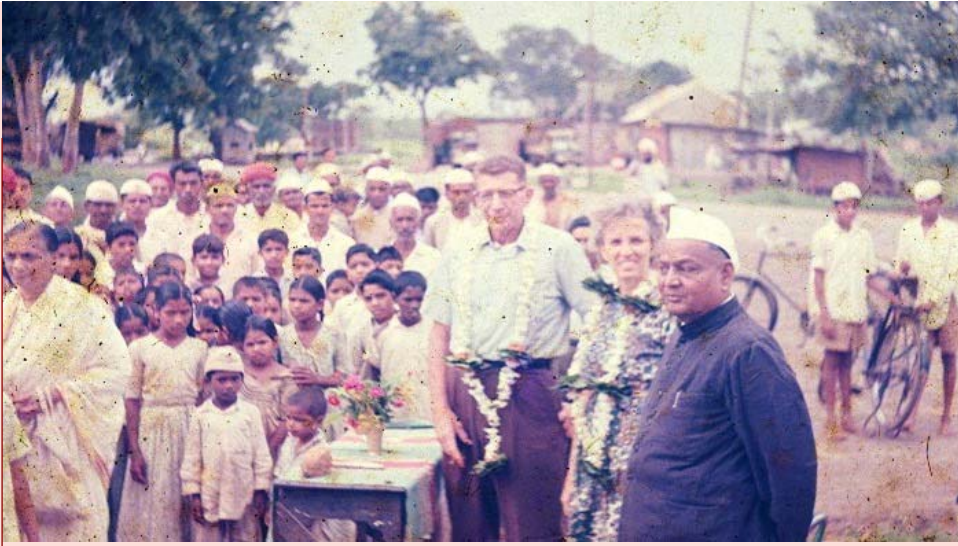
On the day in 1968 when the Brotzmans left India, Richard was unable to join his brother in driving them to the airport in Mumbai because he was scheduled for minor surgery. The procedure was bungled. Richard was in a coma for six months and hospital-bound for two years before he could return to help in the family business, marry and raise his own family. During my visit, Richard drove me around in his specially equipped automobile, showing me the extent of their vast 2,000-employee enterprise. That afternoon was the first time I rode in such a vehicle in which all the controls were hand-managed. I marveled at how adept he was at maneuvering the byways and highways.

The brothers invited me to their customary daily lunch in Richard's adjoining office, all part of their business plan to keep things simple and direct. This day, they talked about Ivan.

“Ivan was a beautiful, straight, hands-on guy who believed in the dignity of labor,” Elias told me. Ivan and Edith worked with this family for the duration of their time in India, which included Ivan's work as an associate director of the Peace Corps India program. This connection continued for many years after the Brotzmans returned home.

The Brotzmans worked with other Nasik area farmers, but they spent much of the time during their four years in India—two as volunteers and another two while Ivan was a Peace Corps staff member—helping the D'Souzas.

With Ivan's advice, the family farm was put on a proper economic footing:



Above: The Brotzmans being greeted at Girnare village, 15 kilometers from Nasik.



Elias D'Souza (left), his son Melvin, and brother Richard (seated) at the C&M office in Nasik.

The D'Souzas closed the piggery, and concentrated on chickens. Ivan told them that the key to business success is access to credit and to use it wisely. So the family began using financing to expand their operation. In 1967, they received a Government of India development loan of Rs. 5,000—approximately \$1,000 in those days—and quickly repaid it. The D'Souzas were on their way.

Elias is steadfast in the belief that the

spirit of Ivan is responsible for all that the D'Souzas have accomplished. Ivan not only got things going, Elias says, but Ivan and Edith remained life-long friends of the D'Souza family. Over their 40-year friendship, their ties and communications were so constant and deep that Elias and Richard spoke on the phone with Ivan the day before he died in a Florida nursing home in 2004. Edith died in 2002.

When Elias made his first trip to the

United States in 1972, two noteworthy things happened: He met once again with Ivan, who would remain prominent in the family's itinerary for more than three decades, and he bought a layer cage to bring back to India as a sample. This was India's first application of a factory approach to chicken rearing that permits more intensive use of space with higher-volume production. The family ordered 30,000 more cages, then doubled that order, and their first major expansion was underway. The egg and meat business methodically and steadily grew to meet the growing appetite for chickens in the Greater Nasik market.

The company was originally a partnership organized as CHEMNR Farms, an acronym containing the names of the mother and father, their two sons and two daughters. In 1979, the family bought 32 hectares of land to start a broiler farm and incorporated it as C&M Farms. This main corporate vehicle remains today, with two other companies handling their parent stock and breeding activities. By 1980, their market expanded to Mumbai, where five-star hotels and airlines sought out their eggs and chickens.

Seven years later, they stopped producing eggs and meat and began producing day-old chicks and eggs for hatching and developing parent stock. This remains their field of operation and one in which the D'Souzas play a major role in the Asian market.

In 1994, C&M made an ill-fated tie-up with an international supplier of breeding stock. For the D'Souzas, the deal proved disastrous because the stock they received was fatally infected with a vertically transmittable disease called Avian Leucosis. They reached a settlement with the supplier but Elias calculates that they lost about \$20 million. It took a decade of financial scrambling by the family, but the brothers say they overcame these setbacks because Ivan Brotzman taught them to work hard and to believe in the worth of that effort.

"It was only because of faith in ourselves that came from Ivan's encouragement that we were able to persevere," Richard says.



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An Experience in India

Buzz Burza first arrived in India as an American Peace Corps volunteer in 1965 and was stationed in Gwalior for two years. He continued making return visits to the country and in 1993 met his wife, Vidhu Ganjoor, through a *Times of India* matrimonial ad. Their four-year-old NGO, the Samvedana Culture and Heritage Trust, (www.samvedanatrust.com), involves bringing to public awareness the cultural heritage of Kashmir, especially through producing CD-ROMs and photo exhibitions that present the evolution and design of Kashmiri shawls.

